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The new East Bloc is open for business

This time it's pro-Russian

Read this article in German and Russian

A year ago, the EU's gravest divisions appeared to run between the well-off North and the debt-plagued, economically struggling South.

But today the rift between the Union's liberal, integration-minded West and a nationalistically oriented East – that encompasses some but not all of Central Europe -- is now grounds for far greater concern.

Events at the tail end of 2017 in Brussels, Budapest, Warsaw, Prague and Vienna proffered stark, disturbing testimony that the EU faces an existential conundrum in confronting Central Europe's nationalist, eurosceptic leaders, led by Poland and Hungary.

Pro-Europe observers such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit see the threat as so great, they argue that enabling contrarian countries to exit the union Brexit-style might be the best solution to keep the EU as we know it.

Though not the puppet master behind the fracturing, Russia has jockeyed to sow dissention between EU members for years – and is now savouring the fruits of its efforts.

A dark irony: a quarter of a century after the demise of the Moscow-enforced Eastern bloc of communist countries, which the Central Europeans endured unwillingly, a new post-Cold War East bloc has emerged in *Mitteleuropa*.

This time, though, it's voluntary and mostly enamoured of Russia and its autocratic leader Vladimir Putin, whose authoritarian manner and nationalist ethos the Central Europeans admire over that of the liberal democracies of Western Europe. (Poland, an exception, may detest Putin for meddling in the region and Russia itself for historical reasons, but like the other Central Europeans it appreciates Putin's unabashedly national, strong-arm style of governance.)

The new East bloc is a loose alliance of states – led by, but not confined to, the Visegrad Group (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia) – with similar, nationally minded conceptions of the EU, human rights, parliamentary democracy, and relations with Russia.

Unlike the EU's western states, which appear disunited and lost in facing the EU's looming deficits, it has a vision for remaking the EU: Europe as a confederacy of independent nations that would possess few supranational functions beyond that of a free trade zone.

This 'Europe of nations', as it's often referred to by the Central Europeans and far-right groups across the continent, envisions sovereign, Christian European states bound together by a rejection of Islam, on the one hand, and multiculturalism on the other.

Also called a Europe of fatherlands, it is strongly decentralised, leaving nation states abundant leeway to design their own laws – unencumbered by the EU – on media, the court system, civil liberties, migration, surveillance, among other categories.

Poland's breach

The battle lines between the different conceptions of Europe's future came more sharply into focus when on 20 December the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, announced proceedings against Poland for political tampering with its justice system.

Should worse come to worse, the Commission could deny Poland its voting rights in EU bodies, a first-ever penalty in the Union's sixty-year history.

The Commission has accused Poland's arch-conservative government of undermining the fundamental values of democratic states. It levelled the same charge against Budapest for interfering in the independence of its justice system and media, though the Commission stopped short of measures leading to the suspension of voting rights.

Under other statutes, the EU is taking Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to court over their refusal to accept EU mandatory quotas for asylum-seekers. Meanwhile, it's suing Budapest for cracking down on universities and civil society groups that receive foreign funding.

The Commission charges that over the past two years, Poland's ruling Party of Law and Justice (PiS) has passed 13 laws that open its courts to

political interference from the executive.

'It's with a heavy heart that we've decided to trigger article 7 point 1 [of the EU treaty], but the facts leave us no choice,' said the commission's vice-president Frans Timmermans, referring to the option of denying a member state voting rights for the violations.

Poland, said Timmermans, had breached the separation of powers that defined the kind of democratic states in the EU. 'Judicial reforms in Poland mean that the country's judiciary is now under the political control of the ruling majority,' he added.

Undaunted by the bombshell, Warsaw shot back that it was guilty of nothing and would continue with its 'legitimate' reforms of the judiciary. Even Poland's president, Andrzej Duda, who is no longer a PiS member, accuses EU leaders of 'lying' when they claim recent judicial changes threaten the rule of law and democratic standards.

Perhaps even more spectacular – and unexpected – Hungary immediately jumped to Warsaw's defence. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has promised to veto EU sanctions against Poland should the proceedings get that far.

'We shall defend Poland in the face of an unfair, fabricated political procedure,' said Hungary's deputy prime minister Zsolt Semjen.

The Czech Republic chimed in less contentiously: Andrej Babis, the eurosceptic billionaire prime minster said he was 'convinced' the Commission's action 'stems from a lack of communication' and that sanctions would 'have a negative impact on the whole region'.

The Commission needs only 22 of the 28 member states' votes in order to issue Warsaw a formal warning, which is the plan. (Germany and France have already said they'd back it.)

But in order to actually suspend voting rights in the EU's Council of Ministers, the unanimous approval of all EU states is needed, which Hungary, at the least, will block.

Austria's swing right

The new East bloc isn't congruent with the Cold War version. Austria, though de facto a member of the Cold War West, had long functioned as a bridge between West and East.

But Vienna forfeited this cachet when on 18 December a new right-wing Austrian coalition – between the conservative People's Party and the xenophobic, far-right Freedom Party – took power in the Austrian capital.

The new government, the only in western Europe with ministers from the far right, is evidence that the Austrian coalition has much in common with those in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic: on migration and refugee policy, EU integration, domestic security priorities, Islam and borders. The rightist administration fits snuggly in the camp of the new East bloc (as would have the UK, had it not elected to exit the EU).

In Vienna, the new prime minister Sebastian Kurz of the People's Party went to considerable lengths to assure the rest of the EU his government has no intention of holding a referendum on exiting the Union, as its national populist partner the Freedom Party had called for in the past.

Yet, on the reforms facing the EU, Austria won't be helping – at least not the way Paris and Berlin hoped it would. The new government, Kurz said explicitly, wants to restrict the EU to fewer policy areas – in the same vein as the Central Europeans who strain under Brussels' supranational remit.

With the Freedom Party in charge of domestic security, the military, and foreign affairs, it's likely that restrictive law and order measures will usher in a new era of control, surveillance and Islamophobia – again, more akin to that of Orbán's Hungary than Merkel's Germany.

Budapest, Warsaw, Vienna, and Prague aren't the only capitals in which Islamophobia, anti-EU sentiment, and fear of migration have become the staples of both conservative and national populist politicians. They're part of every European country's discourse, and are potential partners in governing coalitions.

Many of the political parties in post-communist Central Europe from the Baltics to the Balkans chafe under the EU's yoke, which they believe limits their sovereignty far too much after their liberation from decades of Soviet rule.

Thus the new Eastern bloc is open for business. It evidently has a friend in Moscow, whose media outlets RT and Sputnik, Russia's international propaganda arms, provide plenty of ammunition for proponents of a Europe of nations. In so many words, Cohn-Bendit recognised its lure in today's Europe.



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